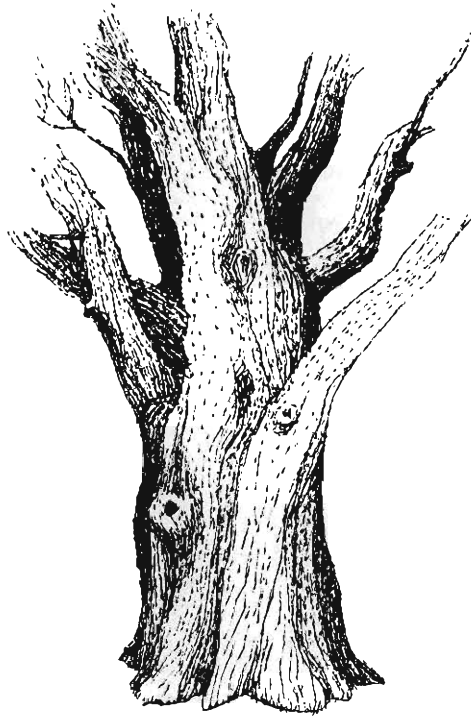


GOODBYE TO BY EDWARD GEARY POPLARHAVEN



Paradise lost, according to Marcel Proust, is the only real paradise. Proust's lost Eden was Illiers-Combray, a village whose medieval church tower and encircling wall gave to his childhood, by their great age, a sense of permanence and continuity. The town of my childhood, Huntington, Utah, is no older than my grandparents and contains nothing that is likely to outlast my grandchildren; yet from it has come whatever sense I have of human continuity. Huntington lies at the west end of a large valley extending from the Wasatch Plateau, that mountain backbone of central Utah, eastward to the canyonlands of the Green and Colorado Rivers. Castle Valley, as the region is called by its inhabitants, is a dry and barren place even by Utah standards. A party of trappers who passed through in 1830 described it as "the most desolate and forlorn dell in the world" and preferred to "forego the acquisition of any benefit in the world" rather than remain there.

However, there was water in the creeks that flowed down from the snowbanks of the Wasatch Plateau and made their cottonwood-marked way across the valley, and this seemed sufficient promise that the land could be made habitable. So a call for settlers was issued in Sanpete Stake conference in 1877, and by 1881 several villages had been established, their people one of the last groups to have the sense of destiny that came with such a call. At Huntington they laid out a mile-square townsite with sixty-four ten-acre blocks separated by wide, straight streets and each divided into four lots big enough for a corral and cow pasture, an orchard and a kitchen garden, as well as a house and dooryard. Thus the uncompromising geometry of the Plat of the City of Zion was imposed upon the valley floor while it was yet nearly as dry as the newly created earth before the Lord sent up the mist which watered the whole face of the ground. The mist never did rise up in Castle Valley, so the settlers diverted the water of the creek into a Town Ditch and a Field Ditch and watered the land themselves. Then they planted trees in the treeless land, trees for fruit, trees for shade, and, to break the constant winds, row upon row of Lombardy poplars lining the streets east and west, north and south.

The Lombardy poplar grows rapidly to an imposing height, but it is not a long-lived tree; its limbs are brittle and its soft wood subject to decay. This pattern of early growth and early decline held true for the town as well as its trees. In the 1880s the streamflow was steady, and the feed on the high summer range to the west and the desert winter range to the east seemed sufficient. The Rio Grande Railroad was coming west from Denver, its construction crews providing a ready market for the valley's produce. More important, the railroad brought the hope of commercial and industrial development, for there were thick seams of coal among the ledges of the Wasatch Plateau, and who knew what undiscovered mineral wealth in the desert badlands? But the railroad was re-routed to the north through Price Canyon. With this change, Price, which had been a smaller village than Huntington or Castle Dale, became the chief town in the region, and in 1894 Carbon County, with Price as its seat, was split off from Emery County. With access to the railroad, large mines were opened in the Carbon County coalfields while the Emery County veins remained undeveloped except for a few small wagon mines for local use. The desert yielded up no great wealth, and even the agricultural base fell short of expectations. The rangeland was soon damaged by overgrazing, leading to erosion of the watersheds and reduced summer streamflow. Moreover, to the problems arising from a shortage of water were added the problems of excessive water in some places. The mancos shale which underlies much of the valley floor holds moisture like a sponge, inhibiting drainage and allowing dissolved alkali salts to rise to the surface. So while some lands were abandoned for lack of water others were lost through this "swamping" process. As a result of these factors, Huntington reached its highest population in the 1890s then, less than two decades after its settlement, stopped growing and began a long, gradual decline.

It was into this gradual and gentle decay that I was born, and I grew up in an old town. The people were old as the majority of each new generation left the valley and only a few, like my parents, remained out of nostalgia or hope to have in their turn children who would grow up to move away. The houses, some of them spacious two-story structures built of an earthy yellow brick from Charles

Green's brickyard, were old too. The barns and sheds, clustered in the center of the large blocks, had the gray patina of aged and weathered spruce. And the trees, those that remained (for few had been planted since the early days), were big and old, the black walnuts starkly massive, the apple trees gnarled and thick, and here and there the towering cones of the spruces. The poplars were mostly gone, but enough remained to give the sense of the original rows. From a distance, where you couldn't see how many gaps there were, how many trees broken and dying, the town still looked like a big grove set amid the green hayfields, an oasis, a haven from the surrounding plains of shadscale and prickly pear. Indeed, my private boyhood name for the town, replacing the prosaic Huntington, was Poplarhaven, and I used to imagine myself immortalizing it in fiction someday as Joyce did his Dublin or Faulkner his Jefferson.

A friend of mine, an easterner, once remarked that to enjoy the Utah landscape you must persuade yourself that brown is beautiful. But it is not brown I think of when I think of Huntington, nor the blue-gray that more precisely describes the color of the soil there. I think of the intense green of an alfalfa field in early June, before the first cutting, a green made the more vivid by contrasting dry earth above the ditchline. I think of water, running fast and cold from the mountains in the creek, running quietly and slowly between the willow-grown banks of the canals, seeping out of the little desert springs, a miraculous trickle out of the rock, overflowing a mossy watering trough to make a brilliant spot of grass and shrubbery against the reds and ochres of Bull Hollow or Buckhorn Draw. I think of open space, the wonderful sense of room-enough: wide, empty streets, vacant pastures between houses, openness all the way to the horizon, fifty miles distant yet visible in precise detail through the clear air. I think of the seasons, of winter nights when my freshly combed hair froze stiff while I was walking to a basketball game in the tiny, crowded, and steaming gymnasium; of summer days when I sat unsteadily atop a load of hay (Grandfather always tried to get the whole field into a single load) lurching along a rutted road, leaving dry wisps on the branches of overhanging trees, breathing the hot dry air, air which always turned moist and cool, no matter how hot the day, when the sun went down and the evergreen-scented breezes drifted down the long canyon from the forested slopes. It is not barrenness I remember, but richness, though a casual passer-through might see only barrenness.

There was a rich variety of people too, solid citizens and town eccentrics (categories which often overlapped): Heber Leonard, who had once been the bishop but whom I remember as a bearded old man carrying on endless theological debates with Heber Brockbank, his neighbor across the street (every village used to have its scriptionaries and theologians in those days before theology was taken over by the seminary system); old Sister Allen, who used to go around buying the carcasses of dead animals for a nickel or a dime in the expectation that she would have a sizeable livestock holding in the hereafter. Then there were the old bachelors, chief among them Bert Westover who reputedly had fought at San Juan Hill with Teddy Roosevelt and who lived, a bent and bow-legged old man, in a one-room cabin across the road from my grandparents. Bert had three great loves: his Bull Durham tobacco, his horses (none of which ever pulled a load, an occasional one of which would occasionally run in local horseraces, but most of which spent their lives grazing along the ditchbanks in unmolested leisure), and his talk-

ing. He had got some radical ideas from somewhere and used to carry on at length about the superiority of the Russian system. Except for his own funeral, I don't ever remember seeing him inside the church house. However, he used to declare his intentions of moving away somewhere before the Millennium because his house would be the first place they hit coming over the hill from the cemetery and they'd eat him out of house and home.

The old people are all gone now, of course, gone and mostly forgotten and with the very marks of their existence largely obliterated. Where Heber Leonard's house stood beneath its two tall spruces on Main Street now stands the two-ward chapel built during the 1950s and looking like all the other two-ward chapels built during the 1950s. Across the street, where mulberry trees shaded the wide front porch of Heber Brockbank's house, nothing now shades the parking lot of a concrete block grocery store. Bert Westover's cabin and the sheds and corrals where his horses made their home are all gone too, and the unused ground whitens with alkali year by year. There is nothing there now to attract the attention of the troop coming over the hill on resurrection morning.

The general tenor of life in Huntington was quiet and uneventful, leading us at times to long for an excitement and stimulation that we imagined as existing somewhere beyond the valley (and which we have not yet found), but there were several big occasions each year. One was the annual basketball game with the high school from the other end of the county, on the outcome of which our self-respect seemed importantly to depend. The others were more widely observed holidays which we celebrated in our own peculiar way.

Before dawn each Twenty-fourth of July, town officials set off a charge of blasting powder, and we all awoke to its horrific thunderclap. Then the high school band, or at least those members who could be gathered up in the summertime, made a tour of the town on a hay wagon, playing martial airs somewhat off-key to children sitting in their pajamas on front porches and old women out in their gardens to gather the produce before the sun-shone on it. After that there was a two- or three-hour break while chores were done and water tended, then at nine o'clock (or more commonly about twenty minutes past) the parade: the marshal of the day, always costumed as Brigham Young, leading the way on horseback or buckboard, depending on his age and abilities, followed by wagons garnished with sagebrush, cars and trucks with strips of crepe paper strung on them, the inevitable hayrack full of Primary children with a big sign on it saying "Utah's Best Crop," and bringing up the rear a crowd of boys on horseback and bicycle. The parade made its way northward up Main Street for four blocks then turned around and made its way back down again, making it twice as long and allowing everybody to see both sides of the floats. After the parade we all gathered in the old meetinghouse for the program. Here, in the arched and galleried hall (now only a memory like so many other pioneer meetinghouses), under the direction of "Brigham Young," a program of songs and readings and tap-dances unfolded, presented by a succession of Miss Deserets, Miss Utahs, Miss Castle Valleys, Miss Huntingtons, enough symbolic-misses to accommodate, with their attendants, nearly all the teen-age girls in town. At the end would come Brigham Young's oration, in which we were exhorted to remember that this was Zion and that we in these valleys of the mountains had a great destiny. The whole program was punctuated not only by applause but by one old man after another rising to his

feet in the audience and crying out, "Three Cheers for Brigham Young and the Pioneers!" or "Three Cheers for the Constitution!" (the Fourth of July and the Twenty-fourth tended to merge into a single event in our town). Then we all joined in—the younger ones of us rather self-consciously—not with the staccato cheers they give in the movies, but giving each syllable its full value: "H-i-i-p, h-i-i-p, hoo-raay! Hip, hip, hooray! Hip, hip, hooray!"—the leader describing large circles in the air above his head with his hand to mark the time. After the program it was home for dinner then back to the "square," the dusty block across from the meetinghouse, for games and races, hamburgers and hot dogs cooked in make-shift booths by red-faced men, and bottles of soda pop from ice-filled washtubs. At night there would be a dance on the tennis court, dark except for the lights over the band, the air, cleansed of the day's heat and dust by the canyon breeze, filled with the sounds of popular songs from the nineteen-twenties and thirties. It was a big day.

But Memorial Day—we called it Decoration Day—was even bigger in its way, for it involved not only those living in the community but also the larger number who had moved away and the still larger contingent of the dead, as we all gathered for the day in the cemetery for a massive reunion and homecoming. People decorated the graves with bridal wreath and bleeding hearts and peonies, if they were blooming early enough, and in the case of those back home for the day from Provo or Salt Lake with store-bought wreaths. Then the grown-ups strolled from lot to lot, renewing acquaintances, while the children ran about stroking the stone lambs on children's graves, gathering wildflowers from the dry hill behind the cemetery, half welcoming, half challenging the kids from out of town who didn't quite belong though their parents did. When I think of community and continuity, of the hearts of the children turning to the fathers, I think of those Memorial Days in Huntington. My city-bred wife is constantly amused at Utah obituary notices, in which someone who has lived in Salt Lake City or Los Angeles for fifty years is listed as being from Beaver or Ephraim or Wellsville and is taken back there for burial. But for me the roots put down in the harsh soil of Castle Valley have proven impossible to transplant, and though I shall probably never live in Huntington again I cannot imagine consigning my bones at last to any other spot than that old graveyard.

I am being nostalgic, of course. But what strikes me as I remember back is how little nostalgia there was in Huntington when I was growing up, how little nostalgia and how much expectancy, of a kind scarcely anyone seems to have anymore. For Huntington didn't just happen; it was established by design, and surely the design had not yet been fulfilled. My grandfather, always an enterprising man, remarked to me shortly before his death that all his life the town had seemed just on the verge of some great development, but the development had never come. After the railroad boom there was the gold boom, then the oil boom, the gypsum boom, the uranium boom, but they all, together with assorted lesser booms, fizzled out.

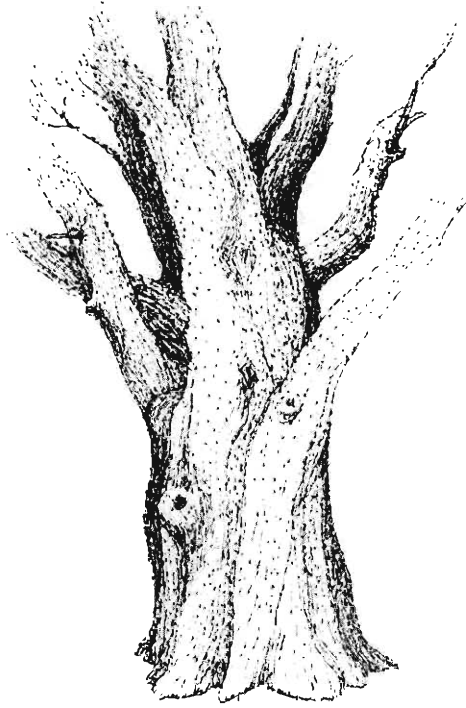
Now prosperity has at last arrived. The land boom has reached Castle Valley. You can read the pitch in the classified ads of any newspaper as high-powered real estate companies peddle the old farms: "Eighty-acre ranch in Utah valley, close to town with half-mile border on county road." "Utah hideaway—forty acres near hunting and fishing." Farmers are selling their land for more money

than they have made from it in a lifetime of hard work, and their place is being taken by new people moving in from the West Coast to seek some dream of their own. But theirs is a different dream, the Hollywood dream of the cowboy on his own spread, not the pioneer dream of building a society. They don't build houses or plant trees but live in mobile homes. And it is not only the new people but the younger generations of the old families who are bringing in a new life style. For example, I can remember only two of my grandfather's contemporaries who habitually wore cowboy boots, while today every second person appears in "western" attire. Community events used to include drama, concerts by a men's glee club, weekly baseball games by the town team (an ill-equipped and not very highly skilled but zestful contingent), and an annual Hereford Days celebration dedicated to improving breeding stock on the farms. Now there are only rodeos.

Industrial development is arriving too, in the form of a power generating plant being built in the mouth of the canyon to exploit the extensive coal deposits. Farmers sold their water rights to attract the plant (they find that Californians will buy land without water as readily as with it), and it was expected not only that several hundred new jobs would be created but also that the county's tax base would be doubled. The jobs have come, and with them dozens of new families to crowd the schools and strain municipal facilities, but in a piece of traditional Castle Valley hard luck a legal technicality has forestalled the tax bonanza. So now the people have joined with the power company in seeking an exemption from air quality laws so that another large unit can be added to the plant. They have been poor in the clear air long enough, they say, and are willing to breathe a little smoke if it means prosperity.

Today the generating plant with its massive smokestack stands on a bluff overlooking the creek, looking very much like a permanent fixture in the landscape. No one seems to care whether the canyon breeze will smell the same once it is in operation. Business is booming at the grocery stores and beer parlors, though prices have risen so high that the older residents now do most of their shopping in Price. The town itself takes on an increasingly temporary look. The poplars are nearly all gone now. No one approaching the town today would guess that they once lined the streets. Not even a scar remains on the earth to show where the old meetinghouse stood, and many of the old brick houses are gone too. The high school is gone, merged into a county high school in Castle Dale. Barns and corrals are being pulled down at an astonishing rate to make room for trailer parks (parks only in the sense of places to park). What few houses have been built in the last several years are mostly pre-fabs that appear suddenly and are capable of disappearing just as fast. Indeed, one feels that when the last of the old mature trees are gone the whole town could be moved somewhere else almost overnight, leaving the valley floor as dry and bare as that party of fur trappers found it in 1830.

Not long ago I attended Sunday School in the already deteriorating "new" chapel that stands on the site of Heber Leonard's old house. The lesson in the gospel doctrine class had something to do with the idea of Zion, and at its conclusion the class president, the daughter of old Bishop Leonard, announced number six as the closing song and took her place at the organ, the only thing salvaged from the old meetinghouse. She didn't have to look at the songbook, and neither did the older singers.



*Beautiful Zion for me,
Down in the valley reclining. . . .*

The younger members of the group tried to follow the obviously unfamiliar selection in the book or merely sat silent, but the older ones knew by heart the words that expressed their conviction that this little town settled by their parents in this remote valley of the mountains was really Zion.

*Clasped in the mountain's embrace,
Safe from the spoiler forever. . . .*

*Robed in the garments of peace,
Virtue the crown of thy glory,
God shall thy kingdom increase,
Angels delight in the story.*

Did they think of what was happening around them as despoliation or as the long-awaited increase of the kingdom? Or did they think of it at all? Did the conviction inhabit some part of their minds immune to the pressure of actual events? That the conviction was there was unmistakable in the final ringing declaration of love for the fields of home:

*When through the wide world I roam,
Naught on the land or the sea
Charms like my own mountain home.
Beautiful, beautiful Zion for me.*